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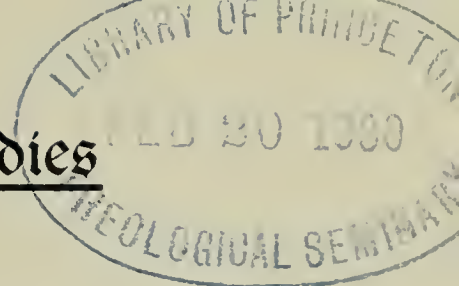
PAUL SABATIER

1858–1928

MANCHESTER: THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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PAUL SABATIER

HISTORIAN OF ST. FRANCIS

A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE BRITISH SOCIETY OF FRANCISCAN STUDIES
ON 29TH APRIL, 1929

BY

A. G. LITTLE, D.LITT., F.B.A.

WITH A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

BY

SIR OLIVER WARDROP, K.B.E.

MANCHESTER: THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1929

PAUL SABATIER.

(Born 3 August, 1858 ; died 4 March, 1928.)

THE *Vie de Saint François d'Assise par Paul Sabatier* was published at the end of 1893, and took the world by storm. The writer had published no preliminary studies and his name was unknown except among his personal friends. I had never heard of him till Dr. Poole sent me the book to review for the *English Historical Review*. We read it on a holiday in Florence and I remember my amazement and delight on realizing that a great light had appeared in the Franciscan firmament.

What preparation had Sabatier had for the work? He was then in his thirty-sixth year—having been born in 1858. His father was Protestant pastor of a small village in the Cevennes—Saint Michel de Chabrillonaux—his mother was of Provençal origin, and from her he may have derived his artistic temperament and his “*joie de vivre*.” The village was half Protestant and half Catholic, and a strong and bitter antagonism existed between the two confessions. The Protestants still kept up by open-air gatherings under the chestnut trees the memories of the dragonnades and religious persecutions under Louis XIV: the Catholics used to file past the pastor’s house in procession on religious festivals and fling curses and shake fists at the windows, which always had the blinds down on these occasions, and the children of the manse had to keep indoors. One of Paul’s earliest recollections was peeping through the blinds as the processions went past and wondering what all this bad temper was about. From these childish recollections he dated his interest in the Roman Church, and years later when he returned to Saint Michel to live and built himself *La Maisonnnette* there, he acted

as a peacemaker. I remember well the first visit we paid to him ; we arrived at the village in a very ramshackle car (it was some 10 miles up among the mountains from a station) and found Sabatier shopping : he carried under his arms two large and long loaves of bread—and explained that one was “ pain catholique ” the other “ pain protestant,” and the Maisonnnette divided its custom equally between the Catholic and Protestant bakers. When he was a schoolboy at Lille he obtained permission to attend the Catholic courses of religious instruction as well as the Protestant. And at the end of his life, when he was Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the Faculty of Protestant Theology, his lectures were attended equally by Catholic and Protestant students.

His family wanted him to be a doctor and he studied medicine for a time at Montpellier, but he was always drawn to the pastoral vocation, and in 1880 became a student in the Protestant Faculty of Theology at Paris. Here the men who influenced him most were Auguste Sabatier, the theologian (who, though he bore the same name was no relation to Paul), Samuel Berger, the historian of the Vulgate, Viollet le Duc, the famous architect and restorer of ancient buildings, and above all, Ernest Renan. It was Renan who first entrusted to him the mission of writing the life of St. Francis. Sabatier himself has told us the story. Towards the end of 1884 Renan, after his lecture, talking to some of his students said : “ When I began to work I dreamt of devoting my life to the study of three periods. Blessed be the illusions of youth ! Three periods ! The origins of Christianity in connexion with the history of Israel, the French Revolution, and the marvellous renewal of religion realized by St. Francis of Assisi. I have only been able to carry out the first third of my programme. You, M. Leblond, must write the religious history of the Revolution, and you (he said, putting his hand on Sabatier’s shoulder) you will be the historian of the Seraphic Father.” This was not his first introduction to St. Francis : in 1883 he had tried to get to Assisi ; and Renan’s brilliant and sympathetic study of St. Francis had been reprinted in 1884 ; but it was some time before the seed thus planted germinated. Sabatier himself told me that before devoting himself to St. Francis he had thought

of working at Roger Bacon, to whom he might have been attracted both by Berger and by Renan. But other duties interposed: he took his degree as B.D. in 1885 with a thesis on the *Didache* or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, and was then appointed assistant to the French pastor of St. Nicholas at Strasbourg. He soon became suspect to the German authorities; he married into a family which was famous as a centre of French cultural influence, and became an ardent lover of Alsace ("Alsace is the conscience of France," he once said to me), and though he refrained from anti-German propaganda his influence especially with the young men was considered dangerous. In 1889 he was offered the choice between German nationality baited with a much more lucrative appointment, and expulsion. He chose the latter, and a demonstration which occurred after his farewell sermon led to his sudden expulsion from the country. He was haled off direct from the church to the station by the police and packed into the train without being allowed to take leave of his family.

He returned to the Cevennes and was for a short time pastor in a small village (Saint-Cierge-la-Serre) even more remote than Saint Michel, and it is here in the winter of 1890-1891 that he began to write the Life of St. Francis. The idea had been working in his mind, for he visited Assisi with his wife in 1888 and again in 1889. There is a story¹ about one—the first?—of these visits which I may quote. As Sabatier and his wife "were trudging up the hill from the station at Assisi, an old Garibaldian colonel joined them and seeing they were tourists remarked: 'So many foreigners come here to see the sights, but none of them ever thinks of studying the life of the Great Saint who lived and worked up there.' In a flash Renan's words came back to Sabatier's memory. He resolved to stay at Assisi, to study the record of St. Francis and to write his life." I think this is apocryphal, for Sabatier says in the advertisement of the first edition of the *Vie de S. François* that he had been working at it for eight years, i.e. 1885-1893: the conception cannot therefore have flashed into his mind in 1888. Much of the life was written

¹ It is printed in an interesting appreciation of Sabatier by his friend, Mr. Wickham Steed, in *The Review of Reviews*, 15 May, 1928.

at Assisi, and Sabatier had acquired a thorough and exact knowledge of the topography of Franciscan Italy.

The *Vie de S. François* deserves its popularity. Within a year or two it had been translated into nearly all European languages, and in French it has run through some fifty editions. To my thinking it is still the best biography of St. Francis. It has the breath of life. Others are to be preferred in some respects. Fr. Cuthbert's *Life*, for example, is written with a complete honesty and charming simplicity and accurate learning, and it incorporates new material and fresh conclusions which were unknown to Sabatier. But it is rather an admirable putting together of the materials than a work of art. It has not the living force and psychological insight of Sabatier's work.

Sabatier's book was first blest by the pope (Leo XIII) and shortly afterwards put on the Index. I do not know who was responsible for that: it was said that Fr. Paschal Robinson had something to do with it, but he indignantly denied it—and it is incredible.

The *Vie* was attacked as being subjective—to put it crudely, the accusation was that Sabatier had read himself into his hero and represented St. Francis as a liberal Protestant of the nineteenth century. There is a modicum of truth in this accusation. Sabatier discusses the question of objectivity and subjectivity, at some length in his Introduction and elsewhere. Let me quote a few passages: “To write history one must *think* it, and to think it is to transform it. . . . Objective history is a Utopia. We create God in our own image, and we impress the mark of our own personality where one least expects to find it. . . . Love is the real key to history.” This is true but dangerous doctrine: to write a man's life you must live it over again with him, but you are almost sure to be more in sympathy with him on some sides and less in sympathy with him on others, and you are pretty sure to emphasize the one and minimize the other. For instance, Sabatier was, I think, the first to recognize the paramount importance of St. Francis' own writings as authorities for his life and thought, and the first to use them effectively as a touchstone of the authenticity of other sources: what is in harmony with their spirit is probably genuine: what is alien

to their spirit is inadequate and misleading, however early it may have been written down.¹ But I, for one, certainly did not realize from the *Vie de Saint François* the undoubted fact that the central subject of all the general letters of St. Francis was the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. Sabatier laid most stress on the evangelical strain—the imitation of Christ, the living the life of Christ—and left the sacramental strain in the background. Yet it is the perfect union in St. Francis of these two strains which have characterized the history of Christianity and so often and deeply divided Christendom, that draws men of different camps to him and helps to make him a very bond of peace among quarrelling sects.

Sabatier was, I think, the first to realize and set forth the pathos of the last years of St. Francis' life—the passionate and often unavailing struggle to maintain his ideal—the apparent and immediate failure in the midst of what seemed to the world the most brilliant and triumphant success (I say apparent and immediate because it was not a final failure: the seed which Francis sowed though often choked has never died and is as full of life to-day as it ever was). But Sabatier represented the struggle rather as one against the papacy and ecclesiastical hierarchy than as one against opposing tendencies in the Franciscan Order itself. Subsequent researchers—working always on Sabatier's foundations—have shown that the conflict during St. Francis' lifetime was mainly within the Order itself—and it must be admitted that some of the most fruitful lines of development in the Order were entered on in direct opposition to the will of the founder.

In that very valuable lecture of his on the Originality of St. Francis, delivered in Kensington Town Hall in 1908 and printed in *Franciscan Essays* (1912), Sabatier admits a certain change of view: "Those," he says, "who would rely on such passages in works of St. Francis (those namely which assert his immediate dependence on God and the rights of the individual conscience, etc.) to make him a sort of forerunner of Protestantism, would be completely wrong. I know that it is a reproach which has

¹ Cf. Professor Burkitt's article in *St. Francis of Assisi, Essays in Commemoration, 1226-1926* (ed. Seton, 1926), p. 22.

been made to me. If I have deserved it, I regret it, and I will try to repair my fault." The essay is worth reading again carefully both for the light it throws on St. Francis and the light that it throws on Sabatier's development.

The *Vie de St. François* is preceded by a critical study of the sources, unfortunately omitted in the English translation. It is a model of what such things should be, and should be read, marked, and learned by every serious student of medieval history. It is not only lucid and wise and full of insight, but critical problems which in ordinary hands tend to be pedantic and dull become in his hands matters of thrilling interest. Like so much that Sabatier wrote it is the starting-point of a whole series of subsequent researches.

It is a remarkable fact that the *Vie de St. François* is based almost entirely on printed sources. The author had examined a few manuscripts especially at Assisi: he knew of the existence of two manuscripts of the *Speculum Perfectionis* in the Mazarin library, but he refers to them both by wrong numbers and evidently did not know what they contained. It was after he had written the *Life* that he began his exhaustive and detailed study of manuscripts. There is a good deal to be said for this procedure. Many enthusiastic young students throw themselves into the study of manuscript sources without an adequate knowledge of what is in print; they waste a lot of time (their own and other people's) and get a false perspective. Sabatier had acquired an almost complete knowledge of all that was printed on his subject before tackling the manuscripts: he knew what to look for, and what was new, and its relation to previous knowledge.

The first great result of his systematic study of manuscripts appeared in 1898 in his edition of the *Speculum Perfectionis*. While writing the *Life* he had come to the conclusion that the Legend of the Three Companions, written *c.* 1245 and recognized as one of the principal sources, was only a fragment; the greater part had been lost or suppressed. He found in an early printed book called *Speculum Vitae*, embedded in a mass of miscellaneous matter, certain chapters which he felt were early—he felt they were inspired by the spirit of early Franciscanism, and as they more or less filled the gap in the Legend of the Three Companions

he maintained that they were the missing portion. They thus acquired a first-rate historical importance as the work of Brother Leo and other companions of the Saint. It was a bold assertion and was attacked by critics as a ridiculous reliance on mere subjective criticism. A search among manuscripts in Paris and elsewhere revealed the fact that these very chapters which Sabatier had picked out from the printed *Speculum Vitae* existed in many manuscripts as a complete and separate work under the title of *Speculum Perfectionis*. It was a striking and triumphant justification of Sabatier's method and of the justness of his historical perception. This in itself was sufficient to make the publication one of great historical importance. But there was something more. At the end of the manuscript which Sabatier made the basis of his edition he found this startling statement : " Written in the most holy place of St. Mary de Portiuncula and finished on 11th May 1228." ¹ According to this the *Speculum Perfectionis* would be the earliest life of St. Francis, written within a few months of his death by his most beloved and most intimate friend. No wonder Sabatier's introduction vibrates with excitement : in some ways—in its union of passionate emotion and accurate learning—it seems to me the finest thing Sabatier ever wrote.

This beautiful edifice was built on an insecure foundation. It was a cruel irony of fate that when Sabatier relied on his own intuition he was right, when he relied on manuscript authority he went wrong : it is the reverse of the experience of most historians. Soon after he published the *Speculum Perfectionis* he discovered another manuscript which had at the end : " Written in the most holy place of St. Mary de Portiuncula and finished on the 11th May 1318." Both had been copied from the same original : one of the scribes had made a mistake : which ? If you write out the dates in Roman figures you will see how easy it was to make a mistake—one would be MCCXXVIII, the other MCCCXVIII—a mere substitution of an X for a C. Sabatier himself had recognized from the first that there was much in the *Speculum* which could not have been written by Leo in 1228 ; he accounted for these passages by supposing later interpolations

¹ This means 1227 according to our method of reckoning.

or alterations. They are more easily and naturally accounted for by the later date : it was not written at a single stretch in 1227, but put together from different (for the most part early) sources at a later time. If you examine the definitive edition of the *Speculum Perfectionis* just issued by our Society—the last great work which Sabatier accomplished—you will find that again and again his critical acumen leads him to adopt in the text readings from the 1318 MS. in preference to those of the 1228 MS. The 1318 scribe is more careful and accurate, and his date is on this ground apart from others to be preferred. Sabatier continued to the end of his life to uphold the earlier date. In a short article in the *Franziskanische Studien* 1926, he makes an interesting defence of it by bringing it into relation to the *Sacrum commercium*—the mystical marriage of St. Francis and Lady Poverty (probably written in 1227)—and by the discovery of another manuscript which contains the date 1228. But his historical sense and honesty compelled him to admit the doubt, and in the new edition of the *Speculum* the date 1228 is omitted from the text and the conflicting dates of the various MSS. are given in the notes.

The new edition of the *Speculum* is the result of a most meticulous collation of eleven manuscripts : it represents an enormous mass of accurate and laborious work, and it may safely be said that it will remain the standard critical edition for all time.

Though Sabatier's view of the origin of the *Speculum Perfectionis* has proved unacceptable to most scholars, his edition of the work marked an epoch in Franciscan studies ; it set people to hunt for any trace of the original materials on which Celano's *Lives* are based—to try to get behind Celano—and has been the starting-point of all subsequent discoveries of documents relating to the life of St. Francis. The most important of these have been those of Father Lemmens, Father Delorme, and myself, and we all gladly recognize Sabatier as our inspirer and guide. Similar discoveries and the interpretation of them are still proceeding : the ultimate conclusions are still undetermined : that they will be valuable is certain.

Sabatier's contributions to Franciscan studies are so numerous that only a few of them can be mentioned, and it is difficult in

view of their importance to make a selection. I will mention only four, which illustrate different sides of his activities and interests. The first is his discovery of the earliest version of the Rule of the Third Order, found in a remote Franciscan house in the Abruzzi, which has been the beginning of a series of investigations still in progress. The second is his edition of the *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum ejus* (the Latin original of the Fioretti). A modern edition was much needed: the manuscripts are so many and present so many variations that a complete critical edition would be the work of many years. Sabatier recognized the truth of the proverb: "The best is the enemy of the good": he provided a good working edition, while giving a long list and full description of many manuscripts for the use and guidance of subsequent editors. The third work is of a different kind: in the Life of St. Francis Sabatier rejected the Portiuncula Indulgence as unhistorical: he subsequently changed his mind and set out the reasons for his new opinion in a most elaborate study of the available material under the title *F. Francisci Bartholi de Assisio Tractatus de Indulgentia S. Mariæ de Portiuncula* (1900): it seemed to me that he devoted far too much time and energy to a comparatively small point, and I told him so. He admitted it in a way but maintained that having made a mistake he must do all he could to rectify it. The fourth is a short study on the Privilege of Poverty granted to St. Claire. There was a good deal of doubt whether it was granted by Innocent III or Innocent IV, most of the learned leaning to Innocent IV; Sabatier proved conclusively that it was granted by Innocent III. But why I refer to the article is that it shows a most keen interest in and acute interpretation of the formulas of the papal chancery and of the marginal notes, endorsements, and other official indications which are found in original Bulls. The article was first published in 1921,¹ and Sabatier when I saw him a little later was full of youthful enthusiasm for this new line of investigation and hoped to examine the collection of original Bulls at Assisi and see what historical conclusions could be made out of the miscellaneous notes on them: but this was not to be.

¹ In *Bollettino della Regia Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria*, Vol. XXIV: a revised version in *Revue d'histoire franciscaine*, Vol. I (1924).

He was most generous in helping other scholars and in suggesting lines of study, and glad to co-operate with them. He established two series of publications: (1) *Collection d'Études et de Documents sur l'Histoire religieuse et littéraire du Moyen Age*, and (2) *Opuscules de Critique Historique*. To both of these he was himself the largest contributor, but volumes or fascicules were also supplied by others, such as Fr. Mandonnet, O.P., Professor Lempp, Professor Boehmer, myself, and others. The *Collection* had, however, a short, and the *Opuscules* an interrupted life. In 1902 he founded the International Society of Franciscan Studies at Assisi under the patronage of the beautiful Queen Margherita. This still flourishes: it has issued a few valuable publications, possesses a useful library, and acts as a centre of union. But I think among his spiritual children the one which Sabatier regarded as the most satisfactory and most successful was the British Society of Franciscan Studies. He loved England and the English, and during the War his influence was recognized as a power. One of the experiences in his later life to which he used to look back with the greatest pleasure was that magnificent commemoration at Canterbury in 1924, the coming of the Friars Minor to England, which was organized by Canon Mason and the Dean of Canterbury in conjunction with our Society, when Sabatier gave an address in the Cathedral. The portrait of him prefixed to the last edition of the *Speculum Perfectionis* was taken on this occasion in the Franciscan garden—a very happy and characteristic likeness.

I have confined myself to Sabatier's work on Franciscan history, but it should be remembered that this was only one—the most absorbing and most important—of many activities. He possessed qualities and gifts which are not often found together, and which, together, appealed to the learned and the unlearned alike—a beautiful literary style, incisive and sympathetic insight into character, remarkable critical acumen, and an infinite capacity for taking pains. The late Professor Davis, Regius Professor of History at Oxford, wrote to me: "I never met a historian who impressed me as he did—an idealist who was also an exact scholar, and also a lover of his kind." Not all Franciscan scholars agree with his conclusions, but all will agree that the

movement of Franciscan Studies, the enthusiasm for Franciscan ideas, which are such remarkable features of present-day thought, owe their origin, their extent and their direction to the inspiration of Paul Sabatier.

On the invitation of the chairman, after the lecture, Sir Oliver Wardrop, K.B.E., formerly Consul-General at Strasbourg, said :

“ I am sure you all join me in thanks to our President for his admirable, sympathetic, yet frankly critical portrait of the life and work of the great man to whom this Society owes so much. We have all learnt a great deal from Dr. Little’s speech and are truly grateful.

“ He has asked me to say a few words about the six years I spent at Strasbourg in close touch with Sabatier and I gladly pay my humble tribute of respect and affection.

“ Sabatier was to me, from the day I first met him, one of the finest men I have known ; as thinker, writer, scholar, patriot, prophet, he was remarkable. His personal help to me was of great value. Transferred from the edge of Asia to Alsace after the War, as the first British official ever permanently resident in that country, I needed guidance, and he always gave it. A few days after my arrival Sabatier had not only taught me what I ought to know about my new post, but he had asked me to meet at his hospitable table all the chief men in public life with whom my work was to be done, and thus my relations with them began well and became more and more friendly as time went on.

“ This was the case in a high degree, with the rulers of the University, where at once I was adopted as a kind of untitled colleague, invited to the domestic meetings periodically held in the several faculties, where debates on delicate questions of a highly controversial kind were usual. Sabatier was not excelled by any present in the power of keeping the discussions good-humoured and helpful, even when men of very divergent opinions spoke on delicate subjects, such as those concerned with the comparative history of religions.

“ The later years of his life at Strasbourg were lived in a

modest, picturesque old house in a large garden on the island of Ste. Hélène, in the river Ill, only a few minutes' walk from the heart of the city, yet as peaceful in its well wooded solitude as his other home in the hills high above the Rhône. In this hermitage he worked, sadly hampered by failing health, and in his few hours of leisure he and his Alsatian wife and niece welcomed students and friends of many nationalities.

“ Joy and peace radiated from him, and even to see him in the streets brought comfort to the heart and refreshment to the mind. He was truly saturated with the spirit of the Saint whose name this Society bears, and that spirit beamed from him even when he was silent. But when he spoke there was often something radiant, I might say seraphic, in his person which fascinated his hearers. In my own home, where he was a most welcome guest, there were three young children ; these infants were wholly charmed and would gaze large-eyed and admiring at Sabatier's beautiful face with its halo of snow-white hair and listen entranced to the words of wisdom, very vaguely intelligible to them, which fell from his lips.

“ This is but a poor fragmentary tribute to pay to one I love, but others will do better, and his name will live as his personality lives in the hearts of his friends, to whom every thought of him is a lasting source of power, peace, and joy.”

